THE ECONOMIST FEB 22 1964

Dallas on Trial

LEE OSWALD, said the Chief Justice of the United States, Mr Earl Warren, is not on trial before the presidential inquiry into the assassination of President Kennedy. Neither is Dallas on trial at the proceedings now laboriously under way in that city. In the dock is Mr Jack Ruby, the killer of Oswald, whose niche in history, thanks to the television cameras, will not be dimmed by the adjective "alleged." Yet there is a powerful temptation to seek some accounting, however oblique, of the man and of the city which produced such a horrific deed. Certainly Mr Belli, the flamboyant Californian lawyer who is defending Mr Ruby, has lost no opportunity of putting Dallas on the witness stand. He wanted the trial to be moved to another city, arguing that some people in Dallas wanted to make a scapegoat of Mr Ruby to purge their guilt. Having failed in that, he now hopes to show that it is impossible to select an unprejudiced jury from Dallasites. By the same emotional logic, there are those who hope that the trial will remain in Dallas, so that the city can demonstrate that it has regained its balance and its lawfulness.

Assassin's Assassin?

The prosecution will attempt to prove that Mr Ruby committed murder with malice. The alternatives facing him are electrocution, imprisonment, confinement to a mental institution or, possibly, liberty. Mr Ruby's defence is expected to be that of temporary insanity—that between the moments when he entered the police station and saw Oswald "smirking, cunning, a Commie, a rat" and when he found himself on the floor, tussling with police, he remembers nothing. To support this plea, Mr Belli, whose towering reputation has been built in part upon his success in medical cases, has mustered a wealth of psychiatric and physiological evidence: Mr Ruby's difficult birth (he was an eleven-pound baby), his lack of a father, the inadequacies of his sexual life, his possible "psychomotor epilepsy." And Mr Ruby himself, highly available to the press, has volunteered that he is a God-fearing man and a one hundred per cent American who loves his country.

The Warren Commission in Washington seems to have received a similar rush of personal detail about the unhappy life of Lee Oswald. His young wife, after completing her testimony, told the press that Oswald had acted abnormally since their return from Russia in 1962; loyalty to her husband kept her from telling the police that he had shot at the right-wing extremist, Major General Walker. Oswald's mother has revealed a dreary life of broken marriages and wandering with her children; yet she fiercely argued her son's innocence, saying that he had been an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency (the CIA denies this). It now seems as if the inquiry may take six months. The Chief Justice, reluctant to relinquish what he felt to be the necessary isolation of the Supreme Court bench, is said to have accepted the task of heading the commission sorrowfully; even tearfully. Nonetheless he did so because he saw the profound importance of having the report on the assassination be thorough, impartial and conclusive.